

Controversy on the curatorial arrangement for the 55th Venice Biennale

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The “Hong Kong Arts Development Council” (ADC) has been arranging for Hong Kong’s participation in “Venice Biennale” since 2001. Except for the first time when participation was by invitation, ADC conducted open call-for-proposal for the five subsequent exhibitions. On 22 June 2012, ADC and “M+”, Hong Kong’s future museum for 20th and 21st century visual culture in the West Kowloon Cultural District (M+), concurrently announced on their respective corporate websites that the two public organisations would be collaborating to organise HK’s participation in the “55th Venice Biennale” (Biennale). Lars Nittve, M+ Executive Director, was to be the lead curator of the Hong Kong pavilion.

Nine arts practitioners in HK set up a “We Want The Truth” concern group regarding this collaboration, and called for petition requiring ADC and M+ to explain why such a decision has been reached prior to public consultation. The concern group also urged the two organisations to explain the reason for their collaboration.

Source of information:

- Local newspaper. For details of newspaper coverage please see Chinese version.
- HKADC website
<http://www.hkadc.org.hk>
- West Kowloon Cultural District Authority website
<http://www.wkcda.hk>
- Facebook
- Hong Kong Arts Discovery Channel

Photo courtesy of wen yau

2012/06

• On 22 June

Press releases were published on ADC and West Kowloon Cultural District Authority websites,¹ announcing that local artist Lee Kit will be Hong Kong’s representing artist to the Biennale. This would be the first time when ADC and M+ collaborated to organise HK’s participation, with Lars Nittve, M+ Executive Director, as the Lead Curator of the Hong Kong pavilion.

Chow Yung-ping, CEO of ADC, said that M+ possessed the professional knowledge and experience required for participating artist selection, while ADC has experience managing the Biennale project. Collaboration of the two organisations would create the best environment for local artists to showcase their creative talent.²

- **On 30 June**

The *Hong Kong Economic Journal* reported that Lee Kit would be the Hong Kong representing artist to the Biennale, opening on 11 June 2013. Lars Nittve told the press that artists had to meet four conditions to qualify for their participation in the Biennale:

1. Experience in producing large scale work
2. Ability to cope with an international exhibition environment
3. Artistic career locally or internationally recognised
4. Being a Hong Kong citizen

On top of the exhibition, ADC and M+ were planning to organise a series of related events including seminars, scholarship, and internship. Estimated budget is HK\$10M, 100% more than that of last exhibition.³

2012/07

- **On 4 July**

Nine arts practitioners, namely Cheng Yee-man, Clara Cheung, Luke Ching, Chow Chun-fai, Lam Laam, Lee Chun-fung, Jeff Leung, Yeung Yang and wen yau set up a concern group “We Want The Truth” on Facebook, and publicly petition for ADC and M+ to explain why collaboration and artist selection decision had been reached prior to any public consultation. They also urged for the two organisations to show the public related meeting minutes.⁴

- **On 5 July**

The *South China Morning Post* interviewed arts practitioners including ADC Member Ger Choi, art critics Oscar Ho and John Batten, and Tsang Tak-ping, curator (of the Hong Kong pavilion) at the previous Biennale. All made comments on the fact that the arrangement for HK’s participation in the Biennale was changed while the process of how the change had been agreed on was unknown to the public.⁵

- **On 8 July**

The *South China Morning Post* summarised the incident and quoted from a declaration drafted by nine local artists and curators. The declaration demanded that there had to be an open and transparent public consultation for the participation arrangement to be changed because Hong Kong’s participation was supported by public money. *The Post* also suggested the organisers to evaluate how this new arrangement impacted Hong Kong’s arts scene and participating artists.⁶

- **On 10 July**

We Want The Truth concern group announced on Facebook that until 9 July, 176 people signed for the petition, and that the signatures and the group’s declaration has been submitted to ADC and M+ on this day.⁷

- **On 11 July**

Yeung Yang, one of the nine artists drafting the declaration, told *Hong Kong Economic Journal* that the main problem with this incident was not about Lee Kit being the representing artist. It was about the public’s rights to learn about and being involved in consultation for organisational changes in public institutions. Chow Yung-ping, CEO of ADC responded that the request in the declaration was reasonable. Yet the changes were made after careful consideration. Visual arts practitioners and ADC members were present in related

discussions. Chow said that a larger budget would be made possible when the two organisation joint forces. The network of Lars Nittve and the M+ curatorial team would also improve the quality of the exhibition.⁸

- On 14 July

Participating artist Lee Kit was interviewed by *Hong Kong Economic Journal*. Lee agreed that ADC should have been more transparent on the new arrangement. However he disagreed with how artists were selected in the past. He believed that a professional exhibition should be handled by a qualified team. He also gave his views on why budget for the upcoming Venice Biennale might be increased.

- On 16 July

ADC told *Hong Kong Economic Journal* that a new participation arrangement was decided for the upcoming Biennale was for the purpose of quality improvement. The artist selection process was thus simplified. A post-mortum meeting has been planned upon the completion of the exhibition.¹⁰

- On 23 July

Ada Wong, Executive Director of Hong Kong Institute of Contemporary Culture, wrote in *Wing Pao* that the incident concerning the Biennale demonstrated the existing problems with ADC.¹¹

2012/08

- On 8 August

We Want The Truth concern group announced on Facebook that Lars Nittve replied to wen yau, one of the artists drafting the declaration, on 3 August.¹²

- On 28 August

We Want The Truth concern group announced on Facebook that the 9 artists drafting the declaration sent an invitation to Wilfred Wong, Chairman of ADC, and Lars Nittve, to an open forum by early September. The two responded that they would not attend.¹³

2012/10

- On 3 October

“We Want The Truth” roundtable discussion was held between 7-9pm at the Fringe Club, organised by the artists drafting the declaration.¹⁴

- On 5 October

Tai Kung Pao and the *South China Morning Post* covered the roundtable discussion and quoted opinions from participants.¹⁵

- On 7 October

The *South China Morning Post* commented that the two parties, namely Wilfred Wong and Lars Nittve on one side, and the participating artists and public members on the other side, stood firmly on their respective positions. No conversation was possible during the discussion.¹⁶

- ¹ “Lee Kit to Represent Hong Kong at the 2013 Venice Biennale”, Press release of WCKDA and ADC, 22 June 2012, http://www.wkcdauthority.hk/en/newsroom/press_releases/index_id_110.html
<http://hkadc.org.hk/tc/content/web.do?page=PressRelease20120622>
- ² “Boost for HK at Venice visual arts ‘Olympics’”, *South China Morning Post* CITY5, 23 June 2012
News coverage, *Tai Kung Pao* B10, 23 June 2012
- ³ “Don’t worry, it will be your turn one day, Lee Kit participating in Venice Biennale”, *Hong Kong Economic Journal* C01, 30 June 2012
- ⁴ Petition for “Public organisations to operate by moral standards”,
<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/要求公營藝術機構合乎道德的作業方式-cal.html>, 4 July 2012
- ⁵ “Nice idea, but you could’ve asked us”, *South China Morning Post* CITY3, 5 July 2012
- ⁶ “Artistic Impression”, *South China Morning Post* R11, 8 July 2012
- ⁷ Petition and declaration:
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=358780670858285&set=a.357430034326682.76707.356875321048820&type=1&theater>
- ⁸ News coverage, *Hong Kong Economic Journal* C01, 11 July 2012
- ⁹ News coverage, *Hong Kong Economic Journal* C12, 14 July 2012
- ¹⁰ News coverage, *Hong Kong Economic Journal* A13, 16 July 2012
- ¹¹ News coverage, *Ming Pao* D04, 23 July 2012
- ¹² Lars Nittve’s written reply wen yau
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=368388216564197&set=a.357430034326682.76707.356875321048820&type=1&theater>
- ¹³ Facebook:
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=374560965946922&set=a.357430034326682.76707.356875321048820&type=1&theater>
- ¹⁴ “We Want The Truth” roundtable discussion: Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/events/413614548705386/>
Video archive: <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/hk-discovery-channel>
- ¹⁵ News coverage, *Tai Kung Pao*, 5 Oct 2012
“Insults and anger over council’s Venice project”, *South China Morning Post* CITY3, 5 Oct 2012
- ¹⁶ “Artistic Impressions”, *South China Morning Post* R11, 7 Oct 2012